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SUBJECT: FRENCH MFA EXPECTS EU-SYRIA ASSOCIATION AGREEMENT  
TO BE APPROVED IN SEPTEMBER

Classified By: Political Counselor Andrew R. Young, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY AND COMMENT: MFA Middle East Director (Assistant Secretary equivalent) Patrice Paoli confidently predicted to WE Office Director Maureen Cormack July 16 that the EU will approve an Association Agreement with Syria at the September 14-15 meeting of EU foreign ministers (GAERC). While acknowledging current Dutch opposition to the Agreement, Senior MFA Syria Desk Officer Thierry Vallat told poloff July 13 that France believes compromise language will be agreed within the EU by September. Vallat said that current EU President Sweden will play an important role in forging consensus among member states. The UK and Germany are "not enthusiastic" about signing the Association Agreement, Vallat admitted, but they do not intend to block it. "We can never be sure, of course," he added, "since anyone can veto." Indeed, Swedish, Finnish and UK Embassy contacts in Paris described the French as over-confident about prospects for the Agreement's approval in September. While the EU still lacks consensus on this issue, momentum is clearly building towards concluding this Agreement between now and December 2009, when the Swedish EU presidency ends. The September GAERC meeting is the earliest deadline that action could be formalized, so if the USG wishes to influence this evolving policy, we may have only six weeks in which to engage our EU interlocutors. (BIOGRAPHIC NOTE: Thierry Vallat, who has focused primarily on Syria for two years at the French MFA, will in August move to Jerusalem to serve as Deputy to EU Special Envoy for the Peace Process Marc Otte. END NOTE.) END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

Agreement Could "Strengthen the Liberals" Surrounding Assad  
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12. (C) Vallat explained that the French have encouraged other EU members to approve the Association Agreement because it will "strengthen the liberals surrounding President Assad and weaken the conservatives." Enforcement of the agreement will press the Syrians to open and reform their economy, Vallat argued, while also improving the rule of law in Syria. He said the Agreement will strengthen the authority of Assad, who will present it as a victory for the regime. Moreover, Vallat stressed that the Association Agreement contains contractual obligations for both the EU and Syria. He said that the Agreement obliges the Syrians, for instance, to liberalize their economy and to engage in dialogue with the EU about a variety of issues, including human rights and democracy.

France Sees No Syrian Progress on Human Rights  
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13. (C) In the same conversation, Vallat admitted that the Syrians have made "practically no progress" in improving their human rights record since the French re-established diplomatic ties in 2007. The Syrian human rights record is a "catastrophe," he averred. He cited as one minor step forward the recent freeing of Michel Kilo. "To release

someone from prison after he has served out his sentence represents progress in Syria," Vallat observed wryly. He then listed three other positive steps the French believe Syria has taken since 2007. They have:

- Sent an Ambassador to Beirut for the first time;
- Served as a moderating influence on Hamas;
- Agreed to pass messages to Iran about international concern over Iran's nuclear program.

Despite Syria's abysmal human rights record, these steps offer "proof that Syria is changing," Vallat asserted.

EU Echo Chamber -- Approval by September Unlikely  
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¶4. (C) EU diplomats in Paris offered somewhat more cautious views on the likelihood of an imminent EU-Syria agreement, but they agreed generally that momentum is gathering in favor. Swedish diplomat Daniel Wolven confirmed that signing this agreement is now one of the priorities of the Swedish EU Presidency. UK diplomat Ben Fender noted that London has reserved support for signing pending translation of the text into the various EU languages (likely by early September). Final agreement to support the Agreement will be contingent upon whether it sufficiently addresses British concerns about Syria in the areas of non-proliferation, anti-terrorism cooperation and human rights; if so, then the UK is not likely to block or seek to add new conditions prior to signing. On the other hand, Fender reported that the Dutch government continues to have "significant problems" with signing the agreement that remain to be overcome within the

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EU. Finnish diplomat Johanna Karanko added that the Syrian reaction also remains a wild card, as Damascus has not yet committed to signing the agreement and it could still seek changes or condition its support on other factors. All agreed that the political context of Syrian behavior as evaluated this fall would influence how quickly or slowly the proposed Agreement could be concluded.

¶5. (C) COMMENT: The reaction of our EU contacts broadly showed that the French position as expressed by Paoli and Vallat is not universally accepted by all 27 member states. That said, it is clear that momentum is building towards concluding an EU-Syria agreement between now and December 2009, when the Swedish EU presidency ends. Wild cards now remain the intensity of Dutch opposition, their willingness to remain the lone country blocking the agreement (particularly in light of the intra-EU displeasure they are facing due to their blockage of progress on the implementation of the SAA agreement with Serbia), and whether the Syrian government will be prepared to accept the EU conditions, which should include a process on addressing WMD and a regular dialogue on human rights issues. The September 14-15 GAERC meeting is the earliest deadline that action could be formalized, so if the USG wishes to influence this evolving policy, we may have only six weeks in which to engage our EU interlocutors. END COMMENT.  
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